THE PALPABLY IMMATERIAL: NEW WORKS BY NATVAR BHAVSAR

BY ELWYN LINN

Five large new paintings (they range from 13 x 23 feet to 12 x 7 feet), conjured from the void, as it were, by Natvar Bhavsar, with the magical material aid of a Guggenheim Fellowship, should, when publicly seen, remove all the associations that have been made with painters like Jules Olitski. Though Olitski has spoken of a dematerialized colour floating free of support, he has always concerned himself with linear counterpoints, even if his line is simply the contour of a faintly emerging area. Misty, vertical, palpitating lines did once appear in Bhavsar’s work and he was thought to have affiliations with Barnett Newman, whose work he admires for the same reasons that he is entranced by Cézanne, Rothko and Monet: the overall inflection.

It is obviously no coincidence that Bhavsar shows with the Max Hutchinson Gallery (his exhibition in the new gallery is scheduled for January), which exhibits such subtle deployers of multiple emphases and strokes and indentations as Milton Resnick and Michelle Stuart. With such artists one can trace intentional and unintentional patterns, “hidden orders of art”, even if they dissolve on contemplation. What is remarkable in the new paintings—as thickly layered as ever with strata of thin and thick acrylic—is the absence of (even opposition to) clues to the pattern-making. The colours drift, float, coalesce, merge fleetingly, identify and deny their hues simultaneously; the slightest shift in light brings new riffs and fog-clouds of hues into prominence; a darkening of light can change the atmosphere of paintings like Vesakh from a burning resonance to a dark thunderous-skied presence. That is, perhaps, to over-emphasize the drama of such paintings, because all of them are enclosed and quiet; any sense of turbulence precedes the moment when the stormy waters are miraculously stilled. Lest the vast expanses of drifting pale yellows, ephemeral pinks, misted mauves and fading oranges appear too atmospheric, Bhavsar has placed yellowed verticals, their soft edges joining the expansive clouds of colour, at each end of Prakara, an Indian term for a specific musical composition. Music, says Bhavsar, is, among other things, a shaping of time, and his paintings are, in a sense, analogous to musical compositions; he does not present us with an enigmatic score, as do some esoteric calligraphers of the moment, but with a process of giving shape to colour without recourse to coloured shapes; his colours are chameleons of shape and change their shapes according to the company they keep. Just as music depends for its effects upon memory and the recurrence of themes, Bhavsar’s paintings, like Monet’s water lily paintings, cannot be read at once; the eye, alerted and supported by its memories of other areas (themes and intentions), explores not quite similar expanses.

Bhavsar’s paintings involve recollections of perceptions. They are not exercises in how one perceives but are an identification of the perceived and the process of perceiving—and, of course, that could be said, too, of Tintoretto’s Crucifixion in Venice, or of Picasso’s Guernica in New York. What is different in Bhavsar is that he gives no signals as to how his works are to be read; it is a directionless reading, like a detail form a Turner sky, and any attempt at relational analysis—that is, any attempt to discover rhyming and echoing areas; shapes that beckon and strive to replace other shapes and forms—which might indicate focal points is quickly and positively frustrated. This does not mean that one is about to be enclosed by a mist masquerading as a vast painting or palpitating wall, because Bhavsar has retained his granular, cracked, blistered and palpable surfaces. Hitherto, in smaller works, his surfaces were secondary pleasures; they have now become tertiary pleasures and, as Bhavsar asserts, inessential. That is true enough; with Hans Hofmann (whose retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington Bhavsar had just seen before I visited his studio), Dubuffet and Tapiés, the material and the colour constantly announce their happy union; the surfaces are demonstrations of how the vehicle carries the colour and the colour lubricates the vehicle. Bhavsar does not want to induce such an appreciation of matter’s joining with and enhancing colour; his new paintings are universes in themselves, and on close inspection the surfaces, where the fissures and craters are mainly accidental, are microcosms of the whole.
To see the universe in a grain of sand is in accord with the experience that the new paintings afford; if Barnett Newman, despite his asseverations that his paintings were symbols of the emotions, was made to fit into the minimal sixties, Bhavsar can no longer be connected with the minimal expanses nor with derivations from gestural abstract expressionism. The largest painting, *Maalhar* (156" × 272"), which is much less diaphonous than the others though by no means announcing that it is pure surface, identifies another distinctive feature of Bhavsar’s work: the intangibility and unanchored shapes deceive one, for the paintings are (for want of a better word amid such indefinables) monolithic in their feeling. "Maalhar" is a term for a musical composition derived from a stormy event; the world is dissolved in dark blue.

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green clouds and rain, and the painting is like a Monet seen at
dusk, with a sharp flicker of pink and orange here and there, but it
is Monet become metaphysical. Impossible and even blasphamous
as that may sound, Bhavsar has achieved it with an almost
nonchalant authority. As he said in an interview with Christopher
who believe in metaphysics and all that, they have the same kind
of concern—that they are not pleased with whatever is around.
That’s why I object to this object-orientated kind of philosophy.
There’s something beyond objects.” Hence, Bhavsar has taken
advantage of the huge formats, to lessen and render almost
negative that painterly surface that has come to preoccupy paint-
ers like Poons, Olitski, Christensen and Wofford; Bhavsar has a
kinship (albeit faint) with Jake Berthot and Paul Rotterdam: the
message is not encapsulated in the covering surface.

My general message is that Natvar Bhavsar, without
bombast and illusions of grandeur, has resurrected the Sublime.
Currently at the Museum of Modern Art, “The Natural Paradise:
Painting in America, 1800–1950”, Pollock’s The Deep, and cleft
cliffs of paint by Still, restate the Sublime as turmoil and Gothic
peril, respectively; but Bhavsar recasts it as something akin to
Freud’s “oceanic feeling”, solacing but only momentarily so.

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